

# There's a Risk in Speaking Truth to Power

## The Beheading of John the Baptist

Mark 6:14-29 Amos 7:7-15  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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In the New Testament, except for the stories of Jesus' trial, execution, and resurrection, there's not another story with quite as much intrigue and political theater as the one concerning the beheading of John the Baptist, as told by the gospel writer, Mark. Did you notice the cast of characters in this gruesome story? (I hope they don't teach this in public schools?) There's an adulterous political ruler, a scheming wife, a dancing seductress, scandalous palace drama, retribution by a gory beheading, with the head presented on a platter, no less. This story has provided endless inspiration to painters, authors and playwrights, composers of operas, movie makers, and dancers of what has come to be known as the 'dance of seven veils'.

Here's one of the most interesting things about all this. **Unlike any other story recorded in the entire New Testament, this account is also recorded outside the Bible itself** by a secular first-century Jewish historian named Josephus. Josephus records that John was killed for political reasons, which is undoubtably true. By the way, it is in Josephus' account, not the Bible, where we learn the dancer's name is Salome.

The Gospel of Mark says John the Baptist's death was motivated by his criticism of Herod's marriage to Herodias, in recognition of the violation of a Jewish law in Leviticus not to take a (living) brother's wife for one's own (Lev. 20:21). Herod had adulterously stolen away Herodias from his half-brother Philip, her husband. This particular Herod (and there are many in this family tree) is Herod Antipas, one of Herod the Great's sons who is the ruler over the region of Galilee.

As to why this story is included as an assigned lectionary text, I think it's because of its unique message concerning the consequences of having a prophetic voice – the risks of speaking truth to power. Therefore, in relation to our own discipleship and ministry, **those with prophetic voices who speak out against injustices in the status quo should not be too surprised when political and religious power structures try to criticize, devalue, or silence them.**

Let's back up just a bit and reflect upon what it means to be a **prophet**, or to have a prophetic voice and message. From a biblical perspective, **prophets are messengers sent by God to speak a word of warning to those in power.** They warn of ensuing **consequences** if those in power continue on their present course of action of not following the righteous and just ways of God. This is the role Amos plays in today's Old Testament reading concerning measuring Israel with a "plumb line", to see if they

line up on the straight and narrow, or are off center in their leadership and relationship to God.

**Biblical prophets are sent by God to proclaim the truth in the present moment, not to predict the future, a common misunderstanding. Prophets were truth-tellers, not fortune-tellers.** And as we know, those in positions of authority don't like truth-tellers telling the truth about them, especially in public. That's true even in countries that say they value free speech, like the United States. We continue to witness those with power and authority resort to tactics and strategies that try to defame or even silence truth-tellers so that others won't believe them and discredit what they say.

Let's back up again and explore what it really means to speak truth to power. The apostle Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, admonishes that we are to **speak the truth in love** so that we can build up the body of Christ, the Church, in love (Ephesians 4:15-16). In the experience of many, however, including myself, especially during debates on the floor of a presbytery meeting, **what any of us consider to be the 'truth' may indeed just simply be our own personal beliefs, opinions, and deeply held convictions. Thus, it's more of a matter of my truth or your truth, not an absolute the truth.**

So, how do we discern the difference between speaking truth and speaking our opinions, beliefs, and convictions? For that, I want to turn to the wisdom of **Walter Brueggemann**, a Presbyterian and one of the most prolific and influential Bible scholars in recent history, especially of the Old Testament. His book, *Truth Speaks to Power: The Countercultural Nature of Scripture*, was published in 2013. In a 2014 interview with the Religion News Service (RNS), Brueggemann was asked about the biblical nature of power and how we should relate to it. He responded:

**Legitimate power always includes attentiveness to justice.** When power is not attentive to justice it cannot endure. This is a summons to us to keep the agenda of justice for the vulnerable alive and front and center to maintain a kind of subversive stance toward power.

Brueggemann was then asked, "Describe the relationship between truth and power as we find them in the Bible." His response is deeply helpful in understanding the biblical nature of truth.

**Truth is not a set of propositions in the Bible, but a cluster of relationships.** Those are relationships of dignity, well-being, security, and respect. When power violates those, then what those who administer such power learn is that they cannot finally withstand the force of truth. So, the truthfulness of God's commitment to neighborliness does not give in in the long run.

**Biblical truth, then, is not what we consider just the 'right' things to believe, but rather concerns right relationships and how we treat others.** When these relationships become distorted and harmful, and when others are not treated equally with respect and dignity, then this is the truth that needs to be spoken to those in power.

**Speaking truth to power can also be expressed by resistance: resistance to unfairness, resistance to inequality, resistance to injustice.** Much of my own ministry over the years can be described, in part, as one of resistance. Much of the ministry of College Hill over the decades can be described, in part, as one of resistance. Brueggemann goes on to offer a warning about **the dangers when Christianity gets in bed with power.**

**It is very seductive for all of us.** And I suppose it has been the seduction of the Jesus movement since Constantine, when Christians gained access to power and have loved having it. I think the collusion of the church with political order in almost any society **causes the church to lose its edge and have failure of nerve about the gospel that has been entrusted to it.**

We are witnessing this yet again in the current wave of **Christian Nationalism**, the attempted merger of extremist ideologies that does harm to both church and state. **It's not about religious freedom, but religious domination.** The type of Christianity practiced by many, and this is nothing new, turns toward a grab for political power and authority, not the spreading of the good news to follow the ways and teachings of Jesus.

But here's the **twist** – there's always a twist. **We like to cast ourselves, especially as progressives, into the role of being prophetic**, the underdog railing against the status quo and courageously speaking truth to power, regardless of the consequences. While this is justified, Jill Duffield, former editor of *The Presbyterian Outlook*, asks us in her commentary on this biblical passage to also find ourselves on the side of those loyal to the status quo, power, and privilege. In that case, she asks of us some difficult questions.

- Who are we desperate to silence or wish would keep silent?
- How are we complicit in the denigration of the just and holy by not speaking up?
- How have we acted to save face rather than act with integrity?
- What actions haunt us and what do we need to do about that unease?
- What is our relationship, as Jesus' disciples, to those with worldly power?

The Scriptures, both Old and New Testaments, never promise us that the journey of prophetic discipleship will be smooth and free of controversy. For by the time we get to the end of today's biblical text we realize that there is no happy ending to this particular story – just a severed head served on a platter. Similarly, Mark uses it to foreshadow what will happen to Jesus when he speaks truth to power.

Ultimately, **this is a story about the misuse and abuse of power, and the structures of injustice it displays when silencing the prophetic cry for justice.** Yet, that did not stop John the Baptist. It did not stop Jesus. It did not stop his disciples. Nor should it stop us, even though there are still a lot of Herods out there, those who may wish to silence the prophetic voice of our ministry efforts of inclusion. The hope, of course, is to not end up with the same fate as John the Baptist.

As we continually work to discern our mission and ministry here at College Hill, we must also continue to give voice to the call for peace, justice, and equity for all persons. Or, as the third bullet point in our **Mission Statement** puts it, **“Reach out with a compassionate voice for peace and justice.”**

Know that there are many within our presbytery, our city and beyond who look to College Hill to be among those prophetic voices speaking truth to power, even when risks are involved. Let's keep up the courage and persistence needed to stay engaged.

Amen.